DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 473 744 EC 309 429

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TITLE	Expecting Success: Self-Assessment and Resource Guide for Improving Service Delivery.
INSTITUTION	Council of Chief State School Officers, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY	Special Education Programs (ED/OSERS), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2002-08-00
NOTE	54p.; Prepared by the Council of Chief State School Officers' Division of State Services and Technical Assistance in support of the Initiative to Improve Achievement in High Poverty Schools. Supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Ideas That Work program.
CONTRACT	H324D990005
AVAILABLE FROM	Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), 1 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Suite 700, Washington, DC 20001-1431 ($5). Tel: 202-336-7016; Fax: 202-408-8072; e-mail: pubs@ccsso.org. For full text: http://www.ccsso.org.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Delivery Systems; *Disabilities; Disadvantaged Schools; *Educational Improvement; Educational Planning; Elementary Secondary Education; *School Administration; School Districts; *Self Evaluation (Groups); Services; Staff Role; State Departments of Education

ABSTRACT

This resource guide on self-assessment of programs and services for students with disabilities is directed to chief state school officers and their agency staff as well as school district and school level staff. The first three parts are organized as individual self-assessments for state education agencies, local education agencies, and schools. Each self-assessment focuses on what can be done to better serve such students, especially in high poverty schools. Each assessment presents 10 recommendations, each of which is followed by a narrative that offers a set of probes for administrators to consider in their school improvement efforts. Recommendations for the state level include upholding a common expectation that all students can achieve excellence and promoting greater flexibility in program implementation among local districts and schools. Recommendations for the school district level include: focus on providing prevention, early intervention, and general education curriculum for all students; and facilitate data informed decision-making and continuous improvement. Recommendations for the school level include: encourage regular and meaningful communication across staff and view families and communities as critical partners. The final part of the guide provides an annotated bibliography of resources, best practices, and strategies for supporting the achievement of diverse learners. (Contains 57 references.) (DB)

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EXPECTING SUCCESS:

Self-Assessment and Resource Guide For Improving Service Delivery

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Council of Chief State School Officers

Council of Chief State School Officers

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The Initiative to Improve Achievement in High Poverty Schools, launched in the spring of 1995, focuses on building the capacity of state education agency officials and their local partners to effectively implement the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and other federal and state education programs. The Initiative, whose goal is to ensure that students in high poverty schools gain the knowledge and skills necessary for sustained success, has come to encompass a wide set of activities and products to reach these objectives. These include national working conferences, special education and extended learning initiatives, the Limited English Proficient Students Assessment Project, State Support of Alternative and Community-Based High Schools, and the High School and Immigrant Students' Project.

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EXPECTING SUCCESS:

Self-Assessment and Resource Guide For Improving Service Delivery

Council of Chief State School Officers

High Poverty Schools Initiative

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August 2002

Suggested Citation

Council of Chief State School Officers. (2002). *Expecting Success: Self-Assessment and Resource Guide For Improving Service Delivery*. Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers.

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This document is a part of a series of publications by CCSSO on serving students with disabilities in high-performing, high poverty schools. Also see *Expecting Success: A Study of Five High Performing, High Poverty Schools* and *Expecting Success: An Analysis of Education Policies in Texas*

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Acknowledgements

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) thanks the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) for their generous support of this research initiative. We also thank four individuals who served as esteemed senior advisors on this initiative: Robert Slavin of the Success for All Foundation; Cherie Takemoto of the Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center in Virginia; David Thompson of the Maryland Department of Education; and Gloria Harbin of the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Thanks are also due to our subcontractors at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) and the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin and their respective staffs: at NASDSE, Bill East, Executive Director; Nancy Reder, Deputy Executive Director; and Patrice Linehan, Policy Analyst; and at the Dana Center, Philip Uri Treisman, Director; Catherine Clark, Program Director for Research and Policy; and Joseph Johnson, Jr., former Program Director of District Support and Services at the Dana Center and current Director of Compensatory Education at the U.S. Department of Education.

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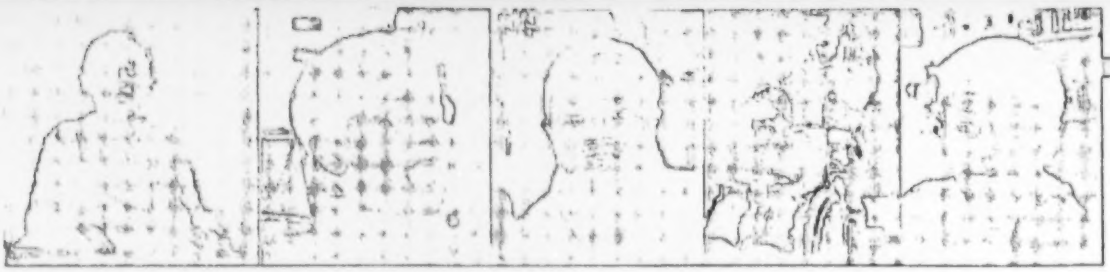
Funding for this research comes from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (H324D990005). This document was reviewed by OSEP Project Officer Selete Avoke. However, the contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. The opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the organizations cited above.



Background, Structure and Content of The Guide

Background

Students at risk of failure in school due to poverty, limited English proficiency, or ethnic background disproportionately experience academic difficulties that could be prevented or mitigated with appropriate instruction. Students at risk of academic failure often lack access to high-quality early childhood experiences that adequately prepare them for school. Such students also often lack access to high-quality instruction in the early grades, which enables almost all students to read well by the third grade, including those with or at risk of developing a reading disability. As a result, many students are inappropriately referred to special education programs due to the limited capacity of general education programs to serve students from diverse and at-risk backgrounds. This challenge is especially acute for high poverty schools.

Many high poverty schools across the country, however, systematically achieve high levels of academic performance among students in at-risk circumstances. Students in such schools achieve at higher levels than perceptions of their demographic backgrounds suggest possible. These schools often rank higher in student performance than low-poverty schools within the same district, region, or state. Studying what makes these schools successful, including district and state factors, and sharing these experiences with others provides an opportunity to make these exceptional schools become the norm.

This publication arises from the Supporting the Achievement of Students with Disabilities in High Poverty Schools Research Project, a Council of Chief State School Officer's (CCSSO) initiative sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs under grant number H324D990005. Investigating the experiences of students with disabilities in five high-achieving, high poverty schools is the purpose of this research project. Under a sub-contract with CCSSO, the Charles A. Dana Center at The University of Texas at Austin studied the experiences of students with disabilities in five diverse high-achieving, high poverty elementary schools in Texas. In conjunction, the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) completed an analysis of state education policies in Texas.[1] This guide emerges from the Dana Center's cross-theme and case study report and NASDSE's policy analysis report.

This resource guide is provided for chief state school officers and their agency staff with the goal of improving achievement among all students, particularly those with or at risk of developing disabilities in high poverty schools. This guide is also directed to district- and school-level staff with a similar objective. CCSSO intends for this publication to be a useful resource for improving educational service delivery among states, districts, and schools. This guide provides a self-assessment of best practices and policies expected to improve the academic performance of students with or at risk of developing disabilities in high poverty schools. It also includes an annotated bibliography aimed at improving the capacity of educational systems to respond to the needs of students with and at risk of developing disabilities.

CCSSO encourages states, districts, and schools to use this guide to conduct periodic self-reviews of their programs and services provided to students with or at risk of developing disabilities and to address quality improvements, particularly in high poverty schools. We also encourage families of students in high poverty schools and with disabilities to use this guide to benchmark the quality of programs serving their children. This guide is intended to help families to identify those features of educational supports and services that when combined result in effective programs, regardless of the specific educational methodologies used.

1 See *Expecting Success: A Study of Five High Performing, High Poverty Schools* and *Expecting Success: An Analysis of Education Policies in Texas*

Structure and Content

The first three parts of this guide are organized as individual self-assessments for state education agencies, local education agencies, and schools seeking to improve their service delivery systems to students with or at risk of developing disabilities. Each self-assessment responds to the question of what can be done to better serve such students, particularly in high poverty schools. Each assessment presents ten sets of recommendations that will enhance the capacity of the education systems to promote high student achievement, specifically among diverse learners. Each theme is followed by a narrative that offers a set of probes for administrators to consider in their school improvement efforts. The themes for state, district, and school self-assessments follow.

State Themes

1. Uphold a common expectation that all students can achieve excellence
2. Examine the characteristics of students with and at risk of developing disabilities in the state, particularly in high poverty schools, and service delivery systems
3. Revisit the state accountability system to create stronger incentives for achieving student excellence and closing the achievement gap
4. Improve the transparency of accountability systems to facilitate data-informed decision-making and continuous improvement
5. Expand opportunities for school districts to apply research to practice, particularly in reading and behavior management
6. Deepen the state's focus on improving teacher skills and competencies
7. Reorganize and allocate resources to address student needs, particularly among diverse learners
8. Promote greater flexibility in program implementation among local districts and schools
9. Strengthen systems for providing services and supports to districts and schools
10. Foster strategic partnerships with family and community-based organizations to better address academic and non-academic barriers to student performance

District Themes

1. Encourage a common expectation of student success
2. Examine the characteristics of students with and at risk of developing disabilities in the district, particularly in high poverty schools, and service delivery systems
3. Focus on prevention, early intervention, and providing access to the general education curriculum for all learners
4. Use professional development to deepen teacher skills and instructional leadership
5. Reorganize and allocate resources to better address the needs of all students
6. Improve alignment between curriculum and instruction with state and local standards for all learners
7. Facilitate data-informed decision-making and continuous improvement
8. Strengthen systems for providing supports to schools
9. Foster strategic partnerships with families and communities to enable student achievement
10. Create stronger incentives for student excellence and for closing the achievement gap

Campus Themes

1. Believe that all students can be successful, including diverse learners
2. Align educational resources to address student needs via the school improvement process
3. Encourage regular and meaningful communication across staff
4. Use student data to target continuous improvements in learning
5. Focus on student-centered learning
6. Address academic and non-academic barriers to learning
7. View families and communities as critical partners
8. Develop systems for identifying and implementing interventions prior to diagnostic testing
9. Provide a continuum of services to students eligible for special education
10. Use special education to fully integrate students into general education

Annotated Bibliography Themes

The fourth part of this guide provides an annotated bibliography of resources, best practices, and strategies for supporting the achievement of diverse learners. These articles and publications, many of which are available on-line, are organized under the following themes:

1. Resources on serving culturally and linguistically diverse learners
2. Resources on inclusion
3. Resources on effective literacy approaches
4. Resources on effective behavioral interventions

5. Resources on schoolwide approaches to delivering instruction
6. Resources on district- and state-level approaches, including program collaboration
7. Resources on improving teacher quality
8. Resources on special education policy, prevention, early intervention, and transition

Most themes and resources included in this guide reflect practices that are appropriate for educating all children, not solely students with disabilities or in high poverty schools. This pattern emerges from the principal findings of the Students with Disabilities in High Poverty Schools Research Project: that all students, including those with or at-risk of developing disabilities, are best served by high quality general education programs. Such programs demonstrate a high capacity to serve a cross-section of diverse learners, including English language learners and students with disabilities. Moreover, special education complements the general education programs to meet the specific needs of eligible students rather than replaces the general education program or curriculum for students with disabilities. As such, this guide emphasizes the need for special education to support the capacity of general education to serve all learners and for reforms in education to be more inclusive of special education and serving students with disabilities.

The themes and resources described in this guide do not reflect specific instructional strategies or theoretical approaches. Instead, they reflect a set of effective practices and policies identified in sister reports developed collaboratively with the Dana Center and NASDSE.

Additional resources were also reviewed in the development of this guide that are listed under *Guide References*. These resources were extremely useful in describing the multiple audiences and issues that should be attended to when improving the capacities of educational systems to respond to the needs of all learners. A trio of documents published by the Kentucky Department of Education that describe district and school standards for school improvement were especially valuable. The information provided in this self-assessment and resource guide, however, does not necessarily reflect the views of these publications' authors or the organizations they represent.

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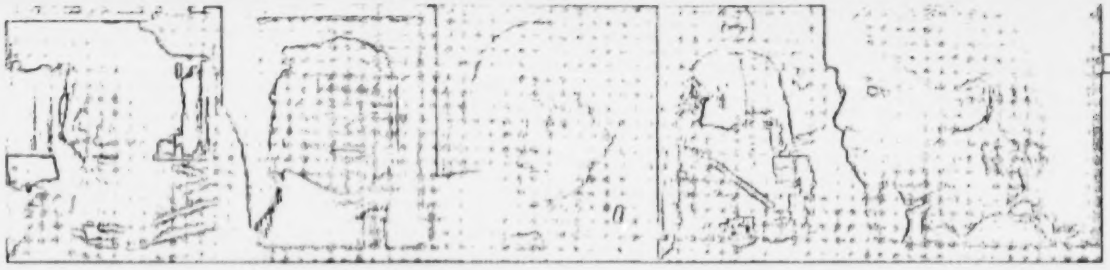

Self Assessment: State Education Agency

What can state education agencies do to improve the capacity of districts to better serve students with and at risk of developing disabilities in high poverty schools? Based on the state policy report[2] completed for the Students with Disabilities in High Poverty Schools Project and other resources, states can consider a number of strategies. In particular, states can:

1. Uphold a common expectation that all students can achieve excellence;
2. Examine the characteristics of students with and at risk of developing disabilities in the state, particularly in high poverty schools, and service delivery systems;
3. Revisit the state accountability system to create stronger incentives for achieving student excellence and closing the achievement gap;
4. Improve the transparency of accountability systems to facilitate data-informed decision-making and continuous improvement;
5. Expand opportunities for school districts to apply research to practice, particularly in reading and behavior management;
6. Deepen the state's focus on improving teacher skills and competencies;
7. Reorganize and allocate resources to address student needs, particularly among diverse learners;
8. Promote greater flexibility in program implementation among local districts and schools;
9. Strengthen systems for providing services and supports to districts and schools; and
10. Foster strategic partnerships with family and community-based organizations to better address academic and non-academic barriers to student performance.

A description of each of these themes and questions for state agency reflection follow.

1. Uphold a common expectation that all students can achieve excellence

A common vision that all children can succeed if provided effective instruction is a familiar belief embedded in the philosophy of standards-based reform. Every state has applied this belief to structure educational reform. What is less familiar, however, is the belief that all children, including culturally and linguistically diverse students, students in high poverty schools, and students with and at risk of developing disabilities can be as successful in school as their counterparts. States that uphold the belief that all students can achieve at high levels and devote significant resources to enable all students to reach high standards have experienced dramatic success in raising student achievement and closing the achievement gap among groups of students. They undertake a variety of efforts, some of which are described below.

Among states demonstrating high expectations for all students, leaders cultivate shared beliefs throughout the state that all students can succeed. This belief extends from the state board of education and state educational staff to local districts, business leaders, and parent groups across the state. In turn, state education leaders make decisions in accordance with the belief that all children, regardless of their racial, socio-economic, or language differences have the capacity to learn and succeed at high academic levels. They believe that it is the responsibility of adults throughout the state education system to ensure that all children succeed academically and to align educational decision-making at all levels with the mission of student excellence. State decisions regarding support for student academic performance are based on an ongoing analysis of data on student performance data disaggregated by income level, race, gender, language, and disability status to identify inequities in student outcomes. They work aggressively with all stakeholders to eliminate inequities. A "no excuses" spirit pervades state education agency efforts to close gaps in achievement.

[2] See *Expecting Success: An Analysis of Education Policies in Texas*

States seeking to uphold a common expectation of student success among all learners, including students with and at risk of developing disabilities in high poverty schools, can consider the following probes:

- Has the state developed a vision of student excellence? Does the vision include the high achievement of students with disabilities?
- Is there a common vision among educational stakeholders (the Chief, school board members, state education agency staff including categorical program staff, regional technical assistance providers, local superintendents, principals, teachers, other school personnel, families, business leaders, and others) throughout the state that all students can succeed?
- Does the state communicate its vision and progress toward its mission effectively to all groups of stakeholders?
- Does the state regularly report to the public its progress in enabling all students to achieve at high levels, including diverse learners (e.g., students with disabilities, culturally and linguistically diverse students, and low-income students)?
- Is student learning the primary focus of state education agency operations? Are state decisions focused on student academic performance?
- Does the state's vision for student excellence inform the design of its technical assistance and support to local districts? Is this the case in all programs?
- Are state-level decisions regarding support for student academic performance based on an ongoing analysis of assessment data and other indicators of student performance for all students, including diverse learners?
- Does the state education agency hold itself accountable to the larger community for the progress of students? If so, how?

2. Examine the characteristics of students with and at risk of developing disabilities in the state, particularly in high poverty schools, and service delivery systems

Before embarking on an intense discussion of what a state can do to enhance the experiences of students with or at risk of developing disabilities, particularly in high poverty schools, an examination of student demographics and performance is necessary to determine if the need for change is warranted. To focus the discussion, states should consider a number of issues.

- What percentage of the state's student body is eligible for special education services, and what is the distribution of disabilities across this population and by grade level?
- What are the patterns of special education eligibility among the state's major ethnic groups and English language learners?
- In what grades and for what predominant reasons are students referred to special education? Do these patterns vary by ethnicity, language, or income among students, schools, or districts?
- How are students with disabilities served educationally (i.e., in inclusive or separate settings)? Does this vary by income, ethnicity, language, district, or other factors?
- How do referral and classification rates vary among students by economic, ethnic, and language background?
- Are data on performance indicators disaggregated by student race, ethnicity, English language proficiency, disability status, and income?
- Do patterns of performance among students with disabilities vary by students' economic, ethnic, or language background? Do such patterns vary by a schools' economic or ethnic make-up?
- What is the performance of students with disabilities relative to students without disabilities, especially on key indicators such as the state assessment, graduation rates, and behavior outcomes?
- Do any outliers of student success or failure emerge among schools or districts with available data?
- Can groups of students at risk of developing disabilities be identified based on risk factors associated with special education eligibility and student performance in the state? If so, who are they and where are they located?

State education agency staff can rely on child-count and self-assessment data prepared for the federal Office of Special Education Programs to answer many of the aforementioned questions. Disaggregated achievement data from a state's accountability system can assist in identifying patterns and potential gaps in achievement among student groups as well. A number of data sources should be mined, including state monitoring data, to develop a clear understanding of how students become eligible for special education services, particularly due to mild disabilities, and how they perform relative to other student groups and each other. This process will also be essential in identifying school systems that are successful at serving all groups of students, including culturally diverse and economically disadvantaged students. These real-life successes will prove critical in expanding the belief that all students can succeed. Staff at these sites can share expertise with lower performing districts and schools seeking to improve their capacity to serve diverse learners. However, this information gathering process to understand the characteristics of students with

disabilities and the schools and districts that serve them should not be viewed as an end in itself but as a critical step in the overall self-assessment process.

3. Revisit the state accountability system to create stronger incentives for achieving student excellence and closing the achievement gap

If a data review indicates considerable room for improving the performance of students with and at risk of developing disabilities, a state may consider revisiting the effectiveness of its accountability system. Accountability systems focused on student excellence and closing the achievement gap offer the most promise for improving the academic performance of diverse learners. The recently enacted *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* demands that most states refocus their accountability systems to close gaps in achievement among student groups. It is worth mentioning the characteristics of effective accountability systems and their role in improving the capacity of districts to better serve all groups of students.

To foster greater student success, states should consider a number of issues relative to their student accountability system. For example:

- Does the current system envision that all students in each subgroup—economically disadvantaged, students from major racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency—will meet or exceed state standards for achievement? If so, when?
- Is there a common vision, developed by a cross-section of stakeholders (families, teachers, administrators, and community members) of what all students should know and be able to do by subject and grade level?
- Is the state's assessment for accountability purposes aligned with state standards?
- Does alignment characterize other parts of the system, such as the connection between the school, and teacher performance and student performance? If not, where are the gaps between the state's standards and its accountability and assessment system, and how can they be resolved?

States may also want to consider in depth the incentives embedded within their accountability systems to encourage student success. For example:

- Is disaggregated performance data on student achievement by subgroup shared with local districts and schools?
- Must schools or districts reach a specific level of proficiency among disaggregated student groups to demonstrate high performance on the state's accountability system, or is the average achievement of students the only determinant of a district's or school's accountability performance?
- Beyond the state assessment scores of students, what other indicators are included in the state's accountability system (e.g., other indicators of academic performance, attendance, and high school graduation)?
- Is the achievement of districts, schools, and students valued and publicly celebrated? How does the state recognize high performing districts and schools?
- What role does the performance of students with disabilities play in determining districts' and schools' accountability ratings?
- How does the state sanction low performing districts and schools? What strategy or strategies does the state employ to improve the performance of underperforming districts and schools?

Lastly, states should reconsider the ability of diverse learners to access state standards and assessments of performance and disincentives for excluding them. For example:

- Were the state's assessments developed with the learning styles and performance of diverse learners in mind? If so, how?
- What percentage of students is excluded from the state assessment? What are the exclusion rates among disaggregated subgroups such as students with disabilities?
- How are exclusion rates included in the state's accountability system?
- Are alternative assessments for students with disabilities who are unable to participate in the standard assessment aligned with state expectations for student performance?
- Are accommodations for diverse learners to participate in state assessments standardized and articulated by the state to local districts? Are the accommodations utilized in the classroom also available for state assessments?
- What percentage of students participates in the state assessment with accommodations? What are the rates of accommodation use among disaggregated groups?
- Are the scores of accommodated test-takers reported to local districts and schools?
- Are the scores of all students, including those with disabilities and English language learners, included in the state's accountability system?
- In general, can the state's accountability framework or its implementation be improved to enable greater success among students with or at risk of developing disabilities? If so, how?

4. Improve the transparency of accountability systems to enable data-informed decision-making and continuous improvement

To enable districts to utilize data in ways that improve learning opportunities for diverse learners, state accountability systems require data on performance that are transparent and readily understood. Administrators and teachers need to be able to translate information on the performance of students into appropriate actions for school improvement. In particular, practitioners need to understand what the results of student assessments mean for informing instructional practice. To facilitate data-informed decision-making among districts and schools, state education agencies can consider several key questions.

- Does the state have a comprehensive information management system in place?
- Does the state have an accurate student record-keeping system?
- Does the state provide clear and reliable information on the progress of all students to districts and schools?
- Has the state education agency developed an organized data system that promotes the early identification of problems?

States should also consider efforts to make the linkages between performance data and school improvement more explicit. For example:

- Does the state have a strategy for helping schools translate information generated by state accountability and assessment programs into improved practices?
- Does the state assist local school districts in targeting instruction to address gaps in performance?
- Does the state provide training or resources to local districts and schools on how to utilize data for program improvement?
- Do teachers and administrators have the knowledge and skills to translate performance data into appropriate actions?

Transparency should also characterize the availability and use of performance data on diverse learners. Key questions here include:

- Are education personnel able to translate the scores of students with disabilities and English language learners into actions?
- Can the scores of accommodated test-takers be translated into actions?
- Are special educators and instructors of English language services given opportunities to understand the relevance of performance data for modifying instruction?

Clearly, all educators and program personnel need training in what the data means and how it can be used to enhance practice.

A common understanding of what proficiency means among districts, schools, and communities can further promote transparency among state accountability systems. The format used to present key organizational and student performance information should be understandable to varied stakeholders in order to promote clarity. For example, some states provide examples of proficient and advanced student work by grade level on the World Wide Web. Of equal importance is a state policy system that sends coherent and consistent messages to schools and teachers about building needed knowledge and skills. However, state education agencies must be careful to not overwhelm teachers, schools, and districts with too many messages. Toward this end, states can consider whether they have developed and implemented clear and concise statewide plans for improving student performance. States can also encourage local districts and schools to do the same via consolidated planning and school improvement planning.

To promote transparency, several probes can be considered.

- Does the state communicate progress on its statewide plan to the public on a regular basis (annually or biennially)?
- Has the state education agency streamlined district paperwork requirements to respond to demands of the statewide plan and accountability system?
- Does the state provide clear and consistent information to districts and schools about available tools and resources for targeting achievement gaps?
- Are families and community members aware of key state and federal policies? Do they have access to information regarding their schools' and students' performance?

Finally, state education agencies' use of data for program improvement should reflect a commitment to continuous improvement that focuses on evaluating and improving all state education agency activities. Continuous improvement means asking questions about goals, assessment, progress, and achievement (e.g., What are our standards and overall goals? How well are we performing on our standards? Are we progressing toward our goals? Why are we at our current level of achievement? How can we do better?). Continuous improvement also connotes an understanding that changes to improve one system may affect the quality of

education supported by other layers. Probes to consider when revisiting the issue of continuous improvement include:

- Does the state conduct ongoing needs assessments, evaluation, and planning that include categorical programs, such as special education, in overall activities?
- Are data sources aligned with program and instructional objectives?
- Has the state developed a system in which continuous progress monitoring is an ongoing, multiple-measurement strategy?
- Does the culture of the state education agency promote improvement as part of the daily work of all systems and subsystems of the organization?

5. Expand opportunities for school districts to apply research to practice, particularly in reading and behavior management

To expand the capacity of districts to better serve students with and at risk of developing disabilities in high poverty schools, states can provide districts with research-based information on best practices, particularly in reading and behavior management. Among the most frequent reasons for referral to special education are reading difficulties and behavior problems. In recent years, interventions appropriate for the general education classroom to improve reading mastery and classroom management have been demonstrated to reduce the numbers of children who fail at reading or are later identified as having behavior disorders.

State education agency staff should understand that local districts and schools need access to research-based information on best practices in user-friendly formats. State-level staff should understand that a focus on early literacy and behavior management can pay large dividends in addressing student needs early and preventing special education referrals for a large number of students. As such, the state works to build the capacity of districts and schools to use research-based strategies for addressing identified gaps, particularly with regard to reading and social skills. The state provides information on best practices, particularly those of benefit to diverse learners, and responds to local schools' needs for assistance with research-driven recommendations.

States working with districts and schools to implement research-based practices may consider several issues: how to collect evidence of program and practice effectiveness; how to screen programs for quality; how to organize and synthesize information on best practices; and how to present high-quality choices to districts and school staff to meet their needs and help them make informed decisions about school improvement. Among these issues, states may also consider the following:

- Are state-level personnel aware of how poverty, exceptionalities, and culture can affect achievement?
- Is there shared accountability for student performance across state personnel?
- Is state-level staff up to date regarding best practices, particularly regarding reading and literacy through the student age-span?
- Are all education program staffs (general, special, bilingual, migrant, and homeless) informed of best practices?
- Does the state rely on research-based approaches to assist school districts in addressing gaps in achievement?
- Are the strategies advanced by the state education agency effective for all student groups?
- Does the state provide information and assistance on more intensive practices and interventions to assist students with persistent challenges?

Ideally, states synthesize research and share complex ideas with local districts in user-friendly formats, such as brochures or videos. State education agencies must also consider the effectiveness of research-based strategies on the achievement of diverse learners and promote approaches that are beneficial to all students in general and diverse learners in particular. As such, state education agencies can consider the following:

- Has the state taken a statewide approach to putting empirically proven strategies into practice?
- Does the state match statewide initiatives with research-based resources for improving local practice?
- Does the state provide or sponsor systemic professional development opportunities for educators and administrators on the effective components of reading instruction and positive behavior supports? Do all program staff, including paraprofessionals, participate in these trainings?

Additionally, state education agencies can take the lead in developing curriculum frameworks for use by districts and schools to improve local instructional practices. They can also recommend packaged approaches for transforming local practice. In this regard, states should consider the following issues:

- Has the state developed specific curriculum frameworks or other supporting documents with examples of how standards can be applied to instructional practice?

- Do these tools suggest accommodations for instructing diverse learners?
- Are guidelines for accommodations and modifications in curriculum and assessment to support students with special needs clear and widely understood among state, and local staff?
- Has the state established resource banks of materials and instructional tools and encouraged relationships with national curriculum projects or programs?
- Does the state education agency possess independent knowledge of curriculum and program effectiveness?
- Are independent evaluations of program effectiveness versus the perspectives of program vendors relied upon as a basis for states' recommendations to local districts? Is there credible evidence that such programs serve diverse learners well?

6. Deepen the state's focus on improving teacher skills and competencies

State education agency efforts to improve teacher quality are paramount to improving the delivery of educational services to students with and at risk of developing disabilities in high poverty schools. States can employ a number of strategies aimed at improving staff quality, including licensure, induction, and professional development. In particular, to improve the capacities of new staff to address the needs of students with and at risk of developing disabilities, states can align their teacher licensure policies to the model standards for licensing general and special education teachers developed by the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) at CCSSO.

To improve the quality and effectiveness of teacher in-service training, states can set professional development and training standards that meet the following research-based criteria: the training is suited to the individual district or school setting; it is job embedded; it is extended over time; it provides opportunities for feedback and reflection; and it is reform-linked and curriculum-specific. This last factor is particularly important to ensuring that all students have access to the curriculum. For example, state initiatives focusing on literacy should include all staff: from general, special, compensatory, and bilingual education programs. Similarly, initiatives aimed at improving overall school environment should provide training to all school staff. An equally important aim of professional development is to improve instructional leadership and develop the skills of administrators.

To address gaps in achievement, states can provide professional development regarding the use of curriculum and instructional materials and develop specific curriculum frameworks for how standards can be applied in practice. Typically, curriculum has been under the purview of the local district. As states set expectations for increased student achievement and ask local districts to align their curriculums to these expectations, local districts, particularly smaller ones, increasingly need assistance on how to accomplish this alignment. The expertise of state education agencies in providing such assistance can be especially valuable.

To advance teacher quality and the ability of educators to serve diverse learners, states can consider a number of issues.

- Does the state have in place well-articulated standards for professional development that are aligned with student content and performance standards?
- Does the state encourage the development of long-term professional growth plans to improve teacher quality?
- Does the state build the capacity of its teachers by supporting ongoing and job-embedded professional development opportunities?
- Are the instructional needs of leaders being addressed?

Specific concerns related to curriculum and training include:

- Does the state have well-articulated standards for curriculum and instructional materials that are aligned with student content and performance standards?
- Does the state provide sufficient guidance about curriculum and instructional materials?
- Does the state have in place well-articulated standards for teacher knowledge and skills that are aligned with student content and performance standards?
- How are teachers required to demonstrate content knowledge?
- Do only appropriately trained administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, and related service personnel provide services to students with disabilities?
- Is an effective process to monitor, evaluate, and review efforts to improve instructional capacity in place?

Lastly, state education agencies must also sponsor sustained professional development opportunities that enable general educators to diversify instruction and special educators to provide access to the general education curriculum. Here, states should consider the following probes:

- Do in-service and pre-service teacher education programs address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students and their families?
- Does the state provide joint in-service and professional development opportunities for instructional staff across general and categorical education programs?
- Are special educators included in content-based professional development opportunities sponsored by the state, particularly to support literacy?
- Are general educators included in state sponsored professional development opportunities regarding behavioral supports and individualized instruction?
- Are state discretionary grant funds used to strengthen schools' abilities to support students with diverse learning needs?
- Does the state support prevention and early intervention strategies in reading and behavior outside of special education?
- How does the state support building pre-referral and instructional support teams in local schools?

7. Reorganize and allocate resources to address student needs, particularly among diverse learners

State education agencies generally begin the process of reorganization and allocation of services by engaging in state improvement planning and continuous improvement processes. Here, the mission and objective of the state education agency are developed around the state's standards for student and staff performance. Similar to the consolidated planning process for districts, the state takes stock of its resources and performance, and it realigns itself to better address the needs of districts and schools relative to improving student performance. Reorganization and reallocation typically emphasize program coordination, particularly among categorical programs, such as special education and compensatory education, such that the delivery of services to districts, schools, and students is seamless and based on identified needs rather than streams of funding. States should employ a process of continuous improvement to facilitate the reorganization and allocation of resources to address changing student needs and program effectiveness.

To better address the needs of students with and at risk of developing disabilities, particularly in high poverty schools, state education agencies should consider the following:

- Is there a structure for interagency coordination at the state and local level that encourages vertical and horizontal collaboration among staffs and divisions?
- Is there evidence of coordination among special education, Title I, and other federal programs at the state level in order to remove categorical barriers to service delivery and maximize the effective use of resources?
- Does coordination exist between English language learner services and programs offering services for students with special needs, such as special education and Title I?
- Is there interoffice coordination and assignment of fiscal responsibility to support the implementation of statewide initiatives across programs, such as improved reading?
- Is there interagency coordination and assignment of fiscal responsibility to support student services, particularly for delivering services to students with disabilities, across state departments of education, social services, health, and mental health?

State reorganization and reallocation of resources to better address student needs also place premiums on effective communication and equity in service delivery. Toward these ends, additional probes for states to consider include:

- Is the state education agency's approach and interaction with local districts integrated across departments?
- Is there vertical communication across state education agency staff with a focus on key transition points?
- Are sufficient state resources available for professional development that supports collaboration?
- Is there effective assignment and use of staff strengths to address gaps in program capacity?
- Is there a state focus on providing evaluation and follow-up support?
- Does a focus exist on using resources equitably?
- Are discretionary funds allocated according to data-identified needs?
- Is there alignment of federal and state funds with state improvement plan goals?
- Is the structure and staffing of the state education agency aligned to improve the capacity of local districts and schools to improve student performance?

8. Promote greater flexibility in program implementation among local districts and schools

Consistency in goals with flexible implementation is based on the dual premise that those closest to the students know best how to address student needs and that they should have the discretion to decide how to meet those needs. State education agencies embody this belief by building the capacity of local districts to make

informed decisions to address local needs. The state accomplishes this, in part, by allowing flexibility in structure, resource allocation, and program adaptation for districts and schools to support core performance goals. While the state determines what students should know, districts and schools determine what specific educational strategies will be utilized to enable student success.

To encourage consistency in goals with flexible implementation, states should consider the following issues:

- Does consensus exist among state and district leaders on the core mission and values of education?
- Is there agreement with regard to the role of special education and other categorical programs to enable student success?
- Are federal opportunities under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act used to encourage districts and schools to utilize consolidated planning, schoolwide planning, and inclusion of special education services in local and school planning processes?
- Does alignment exist between federal and state laws that enable program coordination and flexibility?
- Has the state developed structures enabling districts and schools to pool resources as permitted under federal law?
- Has the state developed and disseminated guidance to local districts on how to coordinate programs and combine funds?
- Are state auditors trained on how to monitor collaborative program funds appropriately?

Additional probes to promote local flexibility include:

- Is the state education agency budget developed in a holistic manner that is consistent with the state mission?
- Are state program accountability requirements developed such that they do not create barriers to combining funds?
- Do program accountability requirements focus on student performance more than on process compliance?
- Does the state education agency encourage local school districts to use federal and state resources to support district and school improvement?
- Does the state education agency encourage and support innovation and experimentation at the local level to promote student achievement?
- Is site-based management encouraged and supported through state funding and regulatory mechanisms?

9. Strengthen systems for providing services and supports to districts and schools

States can strengthen their systems of providing services and supports to districts and schools by focusing on two goals: creating unified systems to serve all students, including diverse learners; and building their internal and external capacity to provide support to districts and schools.

State education agencies that develop unified frameworks for providing effective services and supports to local districts address barriers to student learning. Unified systems connect early childcare, health services, extended learning, and other community-based systems with public schooling to address both the academic and non-academic barriers to student performance. Such systems also create explicit connections between general education and categorical programs that address barriers to high performance. High levels of communication and collaboration also characterize such systems. State education agencies that exemplify unified systems promote one educational system that includes diverse learners. The education of students eligible for categorical programs, such as special, bilingual, and migrant education, occurs as part of one educational system that serves and expects all students to excel.

States desiring to create more unified systems for providing services and supports to districts and schools can consider the following probes:

- Does the state plan to improve student performance respond to diverse learners eligible for special, English language acquisition, compensatory, and other educational services?
- Does coordination exist between English language learner services and programs offering services for students with special needs, such as special education and Title I?
- Does the state have the capacity to provide a comprehensive array of technical assistance supports needed at the local level to integrate services for all students?
- Is there interoffice coordination and assignment of fiscal responsibility to support the implementation of statewide initiatives to benefit all students?
- Are policies and regulations in general, special, compensatory, English as a second language, and other education programs shared with districts and schools in the context of the statewide plan for student improvement?
- Does the state jointly monitor and offer technical assistance to districts and schools across educational programs?

- Does the state education agency work in cross-agency teams across educational programs to support student achievement?
- Does the state education agency work with other state agencies to provide services to children?
- Does the state encourage districts to use consolidated planning to better serve all groups of students, including those with disabilities?
- Does the state encourage schools to use the school-improvement process to better serve all groups of students, including students with disabilities?

An additional concern for states seeking to improve their systems of support to districts and schools is building their capacity to deliver technical assistance and professional development. As the demand for site-based technical assistance and professional development increases, particularly for low-performing schools, many states have reallocated existing staff to regional offices to provide support in the field. Several states have also expanded regional institutions to provide needed support. Many states rely on partnerships with institutions of higher education and professional networks to improve the instructional capacity of schools. These networks often have focused on improving the knowledge and skills of participants, deploying cadres of teachers who can offer assistance to others, and developing and disseminating specific curriculum products.

As states consider ways to strengthen their capacities to support districts and schools, several issues should be considered.

- Is there adequate infrastructure capacity at the state level to support effective services?
- Can regional institutions be established or expanded to provide services to districts and schools, especially low-performing schools?
- Can the state build or enhance a network of teachers, other education experts, schools, or districts to build professional capacity tied to reform?
- Does the state work with professional associations and institutions of higher education to provide professional development for staff?
- Does the state work with professional associations and institutions of higher education to develop instructional policies and curriculum-related supports? Have these included developing curriculum tools to improve early literacy and guidelines for accommodations to support students with special needs?
- Does the state make funding for services contingent on external providers following state standards for professional development?
- Does the state's regional infrastructure have adequate resources, knowledge, and staff to provide professional development, technical assistance, and other assigned responsibilities?
- Do the regional institutions use high-quality professional development and technical assistance models?
- Does the state share responsibility with local districts for providing assistance to schools, particularly low-performing schools?
- Does the state work collectively with other technical assistance providers to provide needed support?
- Can districts and schools easily access state-supported technical assistance opportunities to improve their performance?

10. Foster strategic partnerships with family and community-based organizations to better address academic and non-academic barriers to student performance

Effective state education agencies recognize the strengths of families and community partnerships and utilize them to improve student outcomes. In particular, they recognize that partnerships with families and communities can promote access to more diverse and equitable educational opportunities; and help communities understand that support for education should be viewed as an investment, not just a cost. Additional benefits of such partnerships can include improving the management and delivery of instruction, strengthening educators' professional skills; supporting seamless transitions from school to work and postsecondary education, and expanding community-based teaching and learning.

State education agencies that envision a partnership with families and communities as an opportunity to strengthen their delivery of services to students with special needs can consider several issues:

- Are families and communities active partners in state-initiated activities, such as planning processes, and public comment opportunities?
- Are training opportunities and the dissemination of information offered in a variety of languages and formats?
- Are families and stakeholders engaged in state partnerships for student success reflective of the diversity of the state's student population? If not, what strategies can be employed to enhance the participation of underrepresented groups?
- Does the state have a vision for how family and community stakeholders should partner with the state to support student success? Was this vision developed collaboratively among stakeholders?
- Should the state develop a plan to foster strategic partnerships with families and community

stakeholders for student success? If so, how should critical stakeholders (e.g., educators, business, family, and community stakeholders) be included in this partnership? How will success be measured?

- Do families and community members participate in the state's self-assessment process, advisory panels, steering committees, and in the development of performance goals and indicators?

Additional probes for states to consider in their efforts to strengthen partnerships for student success include:

- Is there a well-publicized and widely understood structure for ongoing communication between the state education agency and families and advocacy groups?
- Does the state conduct joint training and planning activities in collaboration with families and advocacy organizations?
- Does state-sponsored training and information dissemination address the identified needs of families, guardians, youth, and staff?
- Are families and guardians offered training in procedural safeguards and the process of referral, identification, eligibility determination, and individualized education plan / individualized family services plan development and placement?
- Does the state utilize results from family and student surveys and other community-driven data for state decision-making, compliance, and program improvement?

Self Assessment: School District

What can school districts do to enable all schools, particularly high poverty ones, to better serve students with and at risk of developing disabilities? Based on research completed for the Students with Disabilities in High Poverty Schools Project and other resources, including the *District Level Performance Descriptors and Glossary for Kentucky's Standards and Indicators for School Improvement*, school districts can consider a number of strategies. In particular, they can:

1. Encourage a common expectation of student success;
2. Examine the characteristics of students with and at risk of developing disabilities in the district, particularly in high poverty schools, and service delivery systems;
3. Focus on prevention, early intervention, and providing access to the general education curriculum for all learners;
4. Use professional development to deepen teacher skills and instructional leadership;
5. Reorganize and allocate resources to better address the needs of all students;
6. Improve alignment between curriculum and instruction with state and local standards for all learners;
7. Facilitate data-informed decision-making and continuous improvement;
8. Strengthen systems for providing supports to schools;
9. Foster strategic partnerships with families and communities to enable student achievement; and
10. Create stronger incentives for student excellence and for closing the achievement gap.

A description of each of these themes and questions for local school district reflection follow.

1. Encourage a common expectation of student success

A common vision that all students can succeed if provided effective instruction is fundamental to improving opportunities for students with and at risk of developing disabilities, particularly in high poverty schools. Among districts demonstrating high expectations for all students, leaders cultivate shared beliefs throughout the district that all students can succeed. They make decisions in accordance with the belief that all children, regardless of their racial, socio-economic or language differences, have the capacity to learn and succeed at high academic levels. Leaders in school districts striving for common student success believe that it is the responsibility of adults in the district to ensure that all children succeed academically. Toward this end, district leadership regularly communicates this belief to community stakeholders (families, students, businesses, and others). The district also shares with stakeholders its progress in bringing its mission to fruition.

Districts demonstrating high expectations for all students align their mission of student excellence to their decision-making process. District leadership focuses the staff and larger community on connecting the mission and its beliefs to the design of instructional programs. Decisions regarding support for student academic performance are based on an ongoing analysis of assessment data and other indicators of student performance. In particular, district leadership analyzes available data on academic achievement by income level, race, gender, language, and disability to identify inequities in student outcomes. Moreover, leadership works aggressively with all stakeholders to eliminate any inequities. The district also communicates to the public gaps in achievement, its efforts to remedy them, and its ongoing progress.

School districts with high expectations for all students, including diverse learners, also have an intentional focus on student achievement at all levels. The board of education ensures that the district improvement plan supports the common belief that students can meet high standards, and it consistently focuses on the academic performance of all children, including diverse learners. The superintendent's primary role is to keep the main focus of the district on excellence in learning that closes the achievement gap; the primary role of the central office is to support and assist principals and teachers in educating all students. A "no excuses" spirit pervades district and community efforts to close gaps in achievement.

To foster a common vision that all students can excel, school districts can consider the following probes:

- Has the district developed a vision of student excellence? Does the vision include the high achievement of students with disabilities?
- Is there a common vision among district stakeholders (school board, superintendent, central office staff including categorical program staff, principals, teachers, other school personnel, families, business leaders, and others) that all students can succeed?
- Does the district communicate its vision and progress toward its mission effectively to all groups of stakeholders?
- Does the district regularly report to the public its progress in enabling all students, including diverse learners, to achieve at high levels?
- Is student learning the primary focus of district operations? Are district leadership decisions focused on student academic performance?
- Does the district's vision for student excellence inform the design of its instructional program?
- Are decisions regarding support for student academic performance based on an ongoing analysis of assessment data and other indicators of student performance? Do such decisions include diverse learners?
- Does the district hold itself accountable to the community at large for the progress of students? If so, how?

2. Examine the characteristics of students with and at risk of developing disabilities in the district, particularly in high poverty schools, and service delivery systems

A district committed to improving the educational experiences of students with and at risk of developing disabilities should begin by examining the characteristics of such students in their district and the delivery of services to them. This includes an examination of the demographics and learning characteristics of students, their experiences in general and special education, their current level of performance, and an examination of the instructional approaches utilized with them. This examination also warrants an analysis of the skills and competencies of staff responsible for providing services to students before and after special education classification. Toward these ends, local education agencies can consider the following questions:

- What percentage of the district's student body is eligible for special education services? What is the distribution of disabilities across this population and by grade level?
- What are the patterns of special education eligibility among the district's major ethnic groups and English language learners?
- In what grades and for what predominant reasons are students referred to special education? Do these patterns vary by student, classroom, or school characteristics? If so, what characteristics vary?
- How are students with disabilities served educationally (i.e., in inclusive or separate settings; public or private placements)? Does this vary by student or school characteristics?
- Are data on performance indicators disaggregated by student race, ethnicity, English language proficiency, disability status and/or income?
- What is the performance of students with disabilities relative to students without disabilities? What is the performance of sub-groups of students with disabilities relative to one another?
- What are the competencies of the instructional staff providing services to students with and at risk of developing disabilities? What instructional approaches are utilized?
- Are teachers serving diverse learners highly skilled? Has assigned staff in general, compensatory, bilingual (or English as a second language), and special education received specialized training to provide differentiated instruction?
- Do any outliers of success or failure among students with or at risk of having disabilities emerge among schools with available data?

Local districts can rely on child-count and self-assessment data prepared for their state departments of education to help address many of the aforementioned questions. Disaggregated achievement data from local and state assessments and other indicators can assist in identifying patterns and potential gaps in achievement among student groups as well. An examination of the experiences of diverse learners throughout the district will also prove critical in identifying schools that are successful at serving all groups of students, including culturally diverse and economically disadvantaged students. These real-life successes will prove critical in expanding the belief that all students can succeed. Staff at these sites can share invaluable expertise with lower performing schools seeking to improve their capacity to serve diverse learners.

3. Focus on prevention, early intervention, and providing access to the general education curriculum for all learners

Districts seeking to better serve students with and at risk of developing disabilities focus on providing effective prevention and early intervention services, particularly to support literacy and student behavior. Such districts also focus their efforts on ensuring access to the general education curriculum for all students to minimize inappropriate referrals to special education and to deliver quality services to those with identified disabilities. Toward these ends, districts engage in a variety of efforts to ensure that the instructional program of their schools actively engages all students to improve their performance.

Districts that focus on prevention and early intervention utilize school guidance, federal and state programs, and partnerships with community-based providers to strengthen structures for providing all students access to the general curriculum. Districts require schools to better utilize existing resources to broaden access to the curriculum. Central office staff regularly monitor school practices to ensure that students are provided a variety of opportunities to receive additional instruction to support their learning. For example, districts can facilitate the design of extended learning services to promote student achievement and monitor procedures for low-performing students participating in such programs.

Additionally, districts that focus on prevention and early intervention strengthen organizational structures and instructional practices to reduce barriers to learning. For example, districts can assist schools in the identification, selection, and acquisition of instructional resources that are developmentally appropriate for students. Districts can also provide schools with an array of printed and electronic instructional materials and resources that promote active learning and train staff on their use. Additionally, districts can develop processes to identify and provide ongoing support for students who experience learning problems. These can include processes that coordinate with community agencies to identify and refer students to health and social services and ongoing professional development for staff that articulates the impact of cultural differences, language, and disability on learning.

Districts that maximize access to the general education curriculum for all learners also ensure that students have access to effective reading and behavioral interventions prior to and after special education referrals. Districts often provide training and assistance for school sites to develop effective instructional support teams that provide interventions for students experiencing educational or behavioral difficulties. Central office staff should understand that a focus on early literacy and behavior management can pay large dividends by addressing student needs early, preventing inappropriate special education referrals, and identifying students in need of more intensive interventions. In turn, districts work with schools to use research-based strategies for addressing identified gaps, particularly in reading and social skills.

A number of probes are available to districts seeking to broaden access to the general education curriculum for all students by employing effective prevention and early intervention practices:

- Does the local board have a written policy that ensures all students have equal access to the entire curriculum? Does the board monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of this policy?
- Are instructional resources within the district sufficient to effectively deliver the curriculum?
- Does the district have a process for identifying and providing ongoing support for students who experience learning problems?
- Does central office staff monitor school practices to ensure that low performing students are provided opportunities to receive additional instruction?
- Does the district provide a variety of instructional materials and resources to promote active learning?
- Does the district have written policies and processes for coordinating with community agencies to refer students to health and social services?
- Has the district developed policies and procedures for utilizing extended learning to provide more time on task for low-performing students? Are students with disabilities included?
- Does the district provide training and assistance for school sites to develop instructional support teams?
- Does the district provide ongoing professional development for staff on the impact of cultural differences, language and disability on learning?
- Does the district rely on research-based approaches to assist school districts in addressing gaps in achievement?
- Is central office staff up to date regarding best practices, particularly regarding literacy and behavior support throughout the student age-span? Are all program staffs (general, special, bilingual, migrant, and homeless education) informed of best practices?
- Does the district provide or sponsor systemic professional development opportunities for educators and administrators on the effective components of reading instruction and positive behavior supports?
- Does the district provide information and assistance to local schools on more intensive practices and interventions to assist students with persistent challenges?

4. Use professional development to deepen teacher skills and instructional leadership

Districts seeking to improve the educational experiences of diverse learners devote substantial time and resources to enhance the core instructional skills of staff. They begin by recruiting teachers who are fully certified to fill existing vacancies and by emphasizing the possession and effective use of content knowledge and communication skills in their application process. They also invest in providing research-based, results-driven professional development opportunities that support the long-term professional growth needs of staff. The district ensures that instructional staff has access to curriculum-related materials and the training necessary to use these materials. District leaderships also develops an intentional plan for building instructional capacity through professional development, particularly for serving students with and at risk of developing disabilities. All teachers, including special educators, participate in ongoing, job-embedded professional development that updates their content knowledge and professional practices.

Districts should support the long-term professional growth needs of administrators as well. Central office staff work with school administrators to develop their capacity to facilitate school improvement and perform as instructional leaders. Districts provide opportunities for administrators to develop skills related to budget development and monitoring, personnel selection, and teacher induction. They also create teams of leaders in every school and across every level of the district whose collaboration provides professional development for members. Additionally, districts rely on administrators to support and monitor the professional development of staff and implement performance-based evaluation procedures for professional development. In particular, district policy and practice requires teachers to provide evidence of using effective and varied instructional strategies; aligning instructional strategies with school, district and state learning goals; utilizing appropriate technology; discussing student work and collaborating with others; communicating with families; and holding high academic and behavioral expectations for all students.

To improve the capacities of educational administrators and staff to provide effective services to diverse learners, districts can consider the following probes:

- Does the district work with institutions of higher education to coordinate pre-service teacher education programs with the needs of all students within the district?
- Does the district only hire fully certified teaching staff? *If not, what strategies are in place to* increase certification? Are they effective?
- Are professional development opportunities provided by the district research-based and results-driven? Do they conform to state or local standards for professional development?
- Does the district have a plan for staff development that is aligned with the learning needs of all students?
- Are professional development opportunities evaluated for efficacy and implementation on a regular basis? Does feedback on prior opportunities inform the development of emerging opportunities?
- Does the district provide joint in-service and professional development opportunities for staff across general and categorical education programs?
- Are special educators included in content-based professional development opportunities sponsored by the district, particularly to support literacy?
- Are general educators included in district or regionally sponsored professional development opportunities on the topics of behavioral supports?
- Do professional development opportunities for special educators focus on improving instruction as opposed to paperwork compliance?
- Does the district provide opportunities for administrators to develop skills related to budget development, monitoring, personnel selection, and teacher induction?

5. Reorganize and allocate resources to better address the needs of all students

Aligning fiscal, human, and material resources to address student needs enables districts to better respond to all students. In particular, aligning resources to student needs via consolidated planning enables the pooling of federal and state funds to support the broader implementation of research-based practices. Districts should also consider redesigning their school budgeting systems to provide school sites with budget authority based on per pupil formulas that include adjustments for different student needs. Budget flexibility at the school level is critical because campuses need the authority to reallocate school resources—particularly school personnel resources—to the needs of their school improvement plans. Districts should also afford schools the authority to recruit, select, train, and supervise all professional personnel.

In districts focused on improving outcomes among all learners, the organization of the district maximizes time, space, and other resources to make the most of teaching and learning. The district assigns staff to schools to address specific student needs. The district also takes full advantage of opportunities for sharing

resources, mentoring, and collaborating with administrators and teachers. School boards analyze funding and other resource requests to ensure that the requests are tied to the school's identified priority needs. State and federal program resources, including Title I and IDEA, are allocated and integrated to address student needs identified by the district. All categorical funds are aligned with student performance and are reallocated as necessary to support specific student needs.

Similar to the school improvement process, the district takes stock of its resources and performance, and then realigns itself to better address the needs of schools relative to improving student performance. Reorganization and reallocation typically emphasize program coordination, particularly among categorical programs, such that the delivery of services to schools and students is seamless and based on identified needs rather than streams of funding.

To better address the needs of diverse learners, particularly in high poverty schools, districts can consider the following:

- Is there a structure for interagency coordination at the district level that encourages vertical and horizontal collaboration among staff and divisions?
- Is there evidence of coordination among special education, Title I, and other federal programs at the district level to remove categorical barriers to service delivery and maximize the effective use of resources?
- Does coordination exist between English language learner services and programs offering services for students with special needs, such as special education and Title I?
- Is there interoffice coordination and assignment of fiscal responsibility to support the implementation of districtwide initiatives across programs, such as improved reading?
- Is there interagency coordination and assignment of fiscal responsibility to support student services, particularly for delivering services to children with disabilities, across local departments of education, social services, health, and mental health?
- If there has been increased collaboration, has it resulted in improved student outcomes?

District reorganization and reallocation of resources to better address student needs places a premium on effective communication and equity in service delivery. Toward these ends, additional probes for districts to consider include:

- Does the district model how to integrate services that benefit all students?
- Is there vertical communication across staff with a focus on key transition points?
- Are sufficient resources available for professional development that supports collaboration?
- Is there effective assignment and use of staff strengths to address gaps in program capacity?
- Is there a district focus on providing evaluation and follow-up support?
- Does a focus exist on using resources equitably?
- Are discretionary funds allocated according to data-identified needs?
- Is there an alignment of federal and state funds with district improvement plan goals?
- Is the structure and staffing of the local education agency aligned to improve the capacity of districts and schools to improve student performance?

Among districts encouraging site-based management to address student needs, leadership provides a process for the development and the implementation of school site policy based on anticipated school needs. More specifically, district leadership consistently supports the formation, training, and effective implementation of effective school-based decision-making. The district leadership serves as an active facilitator for board and school site-based council cooperation, focusing efforts on anticipated needs. District leadership consistently communicates information about school-based decision-making (e.g., state laws, and best practices) to school-based decision-making councils, the board of education, and the community. Probes for districts to consider include:

- Does consensus exist among district leaders on the core mission and values of education?
- Is there agreement regarding the role of special education and other categorical services to enable student success?
- Is there utilization of federal opportunities under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to encourage districts and schools to utilize consolidated planning, schoolwide planning, and inclusion of special education in district and school planning processes?
- Has the district developed structures to enable schools to pool resources permitted under federal law?
- Is the district budget developed in a holistic matter that is consistent with its mission?
- Do local program accountability requirements focus on student performance more than process compliance?
- Does the district encourage local schools to use federal and state resources to support school improvement?
- Does the district encourage and support innovation and experimentation at the school level to promote student achievement?

- Is site-based management encouraged and supported through district funding and regulatory mechanisms?

6. Improve alignment between curriculum and instruction with state and local standards for all learners

Developing and aligning curriculum and instruction is a necessary component of district efforts to improve educational opportunities for diverse learners. Teachers in one grade must know what their peers in prior and subsequent grades are teaching. The alignment of curriculum enables the development of focused and coherent practices for the delivery of instruction within the curriculum. Specific practices for aligning the curriculum with instruction can include the development of benchmark targets for all grades in core subjects and a data-driven instructional reform framework for targeting additional time on task in weak performance areas. Teachers in districts with aligned curriculum and instructional practices are not left to flounder under increased expectations. Pressure to perform according to new accountability expectations is always accompanied by district support.

Effective districts initiate and facilitate discussions among schools regarding curriculum standards to ensure that instruction is tied to state standards. Districts also initiate and facilitate discussions between and among schools in the district in order to eliminate unnecessary overlaps in the curriculum and to close curriculum gaps. Such districts also demonstrate vertical communication with an intentional focus on key curriculum transition points within grade configurations (e.g., from primary to middle school, and from middle to high school). They put into place systemic processes for monitoring, evaluating, and reviewing the curriculum.

To further facilitate alignment between curriculum and instruction, districts synthesize and share research and best practices with local schools in user-friendly formats such as brochures or videos. School districts also consider the effectiveness of research-based strategies on the achievement of diverse learners and promote approaches that benefit all students. District leadership ensures that all instructional staff has access to curriculum related materials. District leadership also demonstrates extensive knowledge of the state's standards-based curriculum documents and national standards, and provides assistance to school staff for their use. Additionally, district leadership ensures that all staff members have access to and are trained to use the state's curriculum documents, national standards, and other curriculum-related materials and data resources.

School districts aiming to improve the achievement of their diverse learners by better aligning instruction to the curriculum can consider the following probes:

- Has the district developed specific curriculum frameworks or other supporting documents with examples of how standards can be applied to instructional practice?
- Do these tools suggest accommodations for instructing diverse learners?
- Are guidelines for accommodations and modifications in curriculum and assessment to support students with special needs clear and widely understood among district and school staff?
- Has the district established or does it have access to resource banks of materials and instructional tools? Has it encouraged relationships with national curriculum projects or programs to improve local practice?
- Does the district have (or has it adopted) well-articulated standards for curriculum and instructional materials that are aligned with student content and performance standards?
- Does the district provide sufficient guidance about curriculum and instructional materials to local schools and their staff?
- Is an effective process in place to monitor, evaluate, and review efforts to improve curriculum instructional capacity?

7. Facilitate data-informed decision-making and continuous improvement

Administrators and teachers need to be able to translate information on the performance of students, including students with disabilities, into appropriate actions for school improvement. In particular, practitioners need to understand what the results of student assessments mean for informing instructional practice. To enable this, district staff must continuously analyze disaggregated data to identify curriculum gaps for instructional implications. Additionally, district staff should facilitate opportunities for school staff, school-based teams, and stakeholders to meet and analyze the results of multiple assessments to identify gaps in curriculum and instruction for all schools.

To enable data-based decision-making, districts must also maintain accurate record systems that provide timely information pertinent to students' academic and educational development. Multiple sources of data should be reflected in such systems. Districts should also provide ongoing support and services to schools for the effective analysis of student achievement data. Finally, districts' use of data for program improvement should reflect a commitment to continuous improvement that focuses on evaluating and improving all district-level activities.

To facilitate data-informed decision-making among schools, districts can consider several key questions.

- Does the district have a comprehensive information management system in place? Are students with disabilities included in this system?
- Does the district have an accurate student record keeping system?
- Does the district provide clear and reliable information on the progress of all students and schools?
- Has the district developed an organized data system that promotes early identification of problems?
- Does the district have a strategy for helping schools translate information generated by state and local accountability and assessment programs into improved practice?
- Does the district assist local schools in targeting instruction to address gaps in performance?
- Does the district provide training or resources to schools on how to utilize data for program improvement?
- Do teachers and administrators have the knowledge and skills to translate performance data into appropriate action?
- Are education personnel able to translate the scores of students with disabilities and English language learners into action? Can the scores of accommodated test-takers be translated into action?
- Are special educators and instructors of English language services afforded opportunities to understand the relevance of performance data for modifying instruction?
- Does the district conduct ongoing needs assessments, evaluations, and planning activities that include categorical programs and special education?
- Are data sources aligned with program and instructional objectives?
- Has the district developed a system where continuous progress monitoring is an ongoing, multiple-measurement strategy?
- Does the culture of the school district promote improvement as part of the daily work of all systems and sub-systems of the organization?
- Are policies, processes, and programs revised when their impact on student performance is unclear or ineffective? If yes, give examples.

8. Strengthen systems for providing supports to schools

To help schools make effective decisions about best practices for campus improvement that benefit all students, districts can strengthen their systems for providing support to schools. For example, districts can provide resources for schools and their staff to regularly share successes that improve learning for all students. Districts can also provide opportunities for teachers, including general and special educators, to collaborate across content area and grade level. Ideally, district leaders will work with school personnel to develop a vision of staff learning focused on student outcomes and to implement this vision.

Districts often strengthen their systems of supports to schools by developing unified frameworks for providing services to address barriers to student learning. Unified systems connect early childcare, health services, extended learning, and other community-based systems with public schooling to address both academic and non-academic barriers to student performance. Such systems also create explicit connections between general education and categorical programs that address barriers to performance. High levels of communication and collaboration characterize such systems. School districts that exemplify unified systems promote one educational system that includes diverse learners. The education of students eligible for categorical programs such as special, bilingual, and migrant education occurs as part of one educational system that expects all students to succeed.

Districts with strong systems of support for school improvement include central office staff with the expertise and time to offer ongoing professional development and technical assistance to local schools. The superintendent and district leadership share their skills in the areas of academic performance, learning environment efficiency, and instruction of diverse learners. District leadership regularly leads staff and other stakeholders in reviews of curriculum documents and assessment results. Principals also demonstrate instructional leadership. Many districts also partner with regional technical assistance providers, professional networks, and institutions of higher education to provide supports to schools. These partnerships frequently focus on improving the knowledge and skills of educators, deploying cadres of teachers who offer assistance to others, or developing and disseminating specific curriculum products to improve student learning.

As districts consider ways to strengthen their systems of support to schools through program coordination and technical assistance, several issues should be considered.

- Does the district plan to improve student performance respond to diverse learners eligible for special, English language learner, compensatory, and other education programs?
- Does coordination exist between English language learner services and programs offering services for students with special needs, such as special education and Title I?

- Does the district have the capacity to provide a comprehensive array of technical assistance at the local level to integrate services for all students?
- Is there interoffice coordination and assignment of fiscal responsibility to support the implementation of districtwide initiatives that benefit all students across all programs?
- Are policies and regulations in general, special, compensatory, English as a second language, and other education programs shared with schools in the context of the district-wide plan for student improvement?
- Does the district work with other local agencies to provide coordinated services to children?
- Does the district encourage schools to use the school-improvement process to better serve all groups of students, including students with disabilities?
- Do district leaders and central office staff respond to the professional development and technical assistance needs of local schools, particularly high poverty ones?
- Does the district work with professional associations and institutions of higher education to provide professional development for staff that meets the needs of diverse learners?
- Does the district work collectively with regional technical assistance providers to provide needed support?
- Can schools easily access available technical assistance to improve their performance?

9. Foster strategic partnerships with families and communities to enable student achievement

Districts attempting to close the achievement gap recognize the strengths of families and community partnerships to promote student success. In particular, they recognize that partnerships with families and communities can promote access to more diverse and equitable educational opportunities, advance a common understanding that educational improvement is hard work, and help communities understand that support for education should be viewed as an investment not just a cost. Districts that embrace the strengths of families and communities create alliances with various organizations and entities that assist schools in improving outcomes for all groups of students. In particular, such districts engage families and the public by informing them of the core elements of the district's accountability system, the need for new strategies to raise student achievement, school-based decision-making, and student achievement results. This engagement process includes a description of how the district and local schools respond to the needs of diverse learners, including students with disabilities.

Districts that cultivate strategic partnerships work with families and community groups to remove barriers to student success. In such districts, families and the community are active partners in the educational process, and they work together with school district staff to promote programs and services for all students. Toward this end, the district intentionally involves families in significant ways to support student learning and to improve academic performance and expectations. In particular, the district works with schools to encourage a school climate in which families and guardians are welcome and their assistance is continually sought; it sponsors ongoing programs that promote interactions with families regarding student learning; and it provides ongoing opportunities for families to learn about curricular programs in all subject areas. Additionally, such districts develop productive partnerships with community organizations and businesses and seek community resources to enhance district achievement goals. For example, such districts may partner with local social service agencies and family groups to notify families of available child mental health services in the community. Such districts may also partner with local businesses to provide job-shadowing experiences for children or raise funds for educational purposes.

Districts that envision partnerships with families and communities as opportunities to strengthen their delivery of services to students should consider several issues:

- Are families and communities active partners in planning processes and public comment opportunities?
- Are training opportunities and the dissemination of information offered in a variety of languages and formats?
- Are families and stakeholders engaged in district partnerships for student success reflective of the diversity of the district's student population? If not, what strategies can be employed to enhance the participation of underrepresented groups?
- Does the district have a vision for how family and community stakeholders should partner with it to support student success? Was this vision developed collaboratively among stakeholders?
- Do families and community members participate in the district's self-assessment process, advisory panels, and in the development of performance goals and indicators?
- Is there a well-publicized and widely understood structure for ongoing communication between the district and families, advocacy groups, and the public?

- Does the district effectively partner with business interests to enhance learning opportunities for children?
- Does district-sponsored training and information dissemination address the identified needs of families, guardians, youth, and staff?
- Are families and guardians offered training in procedural safeguards or the processes of referral, identification, eligibility determination, and individualized education plans / individualized family services plan development and placement?
- Does the district utilize results from family and student surveys and other community-driven data, for district decision-making, compliance, and program improvement?

10. Create stronger incentives for student excellence and for closing the achievement gap

Districts aiming to close the achievement gap must develop local accountability practices that make local staff accountable for educational equity and student achievement. District-level practices for holding staff accountable, for student performance include regular superintendents meetings with principals to discuss student achievement and plans for remediation (if needed); regular school and classroom observation by central office staff; evaluation of teachers based on their success in teaching children; and multiple evaluation strategies to continuously monitor and modify instruction to meet student needs. Additional strategies that districts can undertake include facilitating teams of leaders in every school and across every level of the district; ensuring that time is protected and allocated for teachers to focus on curricular and instructional issues; and providing incentives for highly effective teachers to accept assignments in lower performing schools.

To facilitate greater accountability, districts coordinate the implementation of the state accountability program at the local level. Toward this end, a district provides timely and comprehensive information regarding the state accountability program, the purposes of assessment, and a calendar for testing implementation to all stakeholders. The district also communicates to all stakeholders its commitment to the appropriate assessment of student learning, including the use of testing accommodations and modifications for students with disabilities. In addition, the district develops a comprehensive district assessment policy that requires rigor, frequency, and alignment in classroom assessments. The district communicates that performance standards should be evident in classrooms and observable in student work. It is also essential that district accountability systems include incentives to promote high student performance across multiple indicators of student performance, including graduation rates, attendance, citizenship, and behavior.

To strengthen incentives for student excellence and closing the achievement gap, districts can consider a number of issues relative to their student accountability system.

- Does the current system envision that all students in each subgroup—economically disadvantaged, students from major racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency—will meet or exceed state standards for achievement?
- Is there a common vision, developed by a cross-section of stakeholders (families, teachers, administrators, and community members) of what all students should know and be able to do by subject and grade level?
- Is the district's assessment for accountability purposes, if separate from the state assessment, aligned with state standards?
- Is disaggregated performance data on student achievement by subgroup shared with local schools?
- Is the achievement of schools and students valued and publicly celebrated? How does the district recognize high-performing schools?
- How does the district sanction low-performing schools? What strategy does the district employ to improve the performance of underperforming schools?
- Are alternative assessments for students with disabilities unable to participate in the standard assessment aligned with state and district expectations for student performance?
- Are accommodations for diverse learners to participate in state and local assessments standardized and articulated by the district to local schools? Are these accommodations aligned with those utilized in the classroom?
- Are the test scores of all students included in the district's accountability system, including those of students with disabilities and English language learners?
- How can the district's accountability system and its adoption of the state framework be improved to enable greater success among students with or at risk of developing disabilities?

Self Assessment: Schools

What can schools, particularly high poverty ones, do to better serve students with and at risk of developing disabilities? Based on research completed for the Students with Disabilities in High Poverty Schools Research Project and other resources, including the *School Level Performance Descriptors and Glossary for Kentucky's Standards and Indicators for School Improvement*, schools can consider a number of strategies. They can:

1. Believe that all students can be successful, including diverse learners;
2. Align educational resources to address student needs via the school improvement process;
3. Encourage regular and meaningful communication across staff;
4. Use student data to target continuous improvements in learning;
5. Focus on student-centered learning;
6. Address academic and non-academic barriers to learning;
7. View families and communities as critical partners
8. Develop systems for identifying and implementing interventions prior to diagnostic testing;
9. Provide a continuum of services to students eligible for special education; and
10. Use special education to fully integrate students into general education.

A description of each of these themes and probes for school self-reflection follow.

1. Believe that all students can be successful, including diverse learners

To improve the delivery of services to all learners, each of the school's stakeholders—teachers, administrators, families, support personnel, members of the community, and students—embraces the belief that all students can be academically successful and share a sense of accountability for the academic success of every student. School leaders and staff minimize the role of formal categories or labels, such as special education or limited English proficient, in setting expectations and instead set measurable and high goals for all students. In particular, school leadership creates experiences that foster the belief that all children can learn at high levels in order to motivate staff to produce continuous improvements in student learning. Ultimately, school-based staff understand that standards-based reform, if aligned and implemented properly in a climate of high expectations for all students, leads to higher achievement for all students.

Schools that embody the belief that all students can be successful also develop school improvement plans that demonstrate challenging academic goals for all students. These school improvement plans focus on providing intensive, early interventions to bring students up to grade level. Simultaneously, school leaders emphasize the development and alignment of sound content and performance standards for all students. Teachers understand how standards for their own knowledge and skills mesh with their achievement goals for students. They also hold high academic and behavior expectations for all students. Standards of behavior are developed collaboratively by teachers and students, clearly communicated to families, and uniformly applied. Additionally, teachers consistently provide support structures to assure achievement of high academic and behavior standards by all. This can include the use of peer tutoring, mentoring, and cooperative learning. School leaders and teachers also create opportunities for students of all ability levels to interact with each other and use assessment data to uncover areas for student and staff improvement.

Schools seeking to embody the belief that all students can achieve at high levels should consider the following probes:

- Has school leadership established and continually maintained a strong focus on academic achievement and improvement for all students?
- Do school leaders and staff use personal relationships with families, business leaders, and other community members to create a shared vision of student learning for the community?
- Has school leadership established a process that enables teachers to regularly share successes that improve learning for all students?
- Does the school exhibit high expectations for all learners, including students with or at risk of developing disabilities?

- Do teachers and other staff have the attitude that they will do whatever it takes to make sure that students succeed?
- Do teachers and other staff members demonstrate common accountability for all learners?
- Does the school offer a sequence of early intervention programs designed to help families of infants and toddlers begin to prepare for school?
- Do teachers regularly introduce materials and concepts that are up to two grade levels beyond the students' grade classification?
- Do students from all backgrounds and achievement levels have opportunities to develop their higher order thinking skills by participating in enrichment activities?
- Do educators expect the same high level of performance from themselves as from their students?
- Does the school consistently provide support structures (e.g., peer tutoring, mentoring, or cooperative learning) to assure achievement of high academic and behavior standards by all?

2. Align educational resources to address student needs via the school improvement process

In schools that expect success among all student groups, administrators put the talents of teachers to their best use by aligning resources with instructional priorities via school improvement planning. In collaboration with teachers, families, and other stakeholders, school leadership plans and allocates resources, monitors progress, provides organizational infrastructure, and removes barriers in order to sustain continuous school improvement. State and local performance goals drive all campus decisions about curriculum and instruction, budget, scheduling, professional development, and use of staff. Additionally, school leaders and educators are creative in identifying and pursuing new methods of acquiring resources, both within and outside of the school system, to better respond to student needs. Leaders are also deliberate about including special education services within this process.

A school's improvement plan should reflect an alignment between educational resources and students' learning needs. The school improvement plan identifies the resources, timelines, and persons responsible for carrying out each activity. Additionally, the improvement process aligns the school's profile, mission, and desired results for learning with an analysis of the effectiveness of instructional services delivered to all groups of learners, including students with disabilities. Instructional and non-instructional staff are allocated and organized based upon the learning needs of all students. The school improvement plan also connects staff development opportunities with goals for student learning. All personnel, including special educators, regularly participate in professional development that extends their content knowledge, professional practices, and capacity to educate all students to standards.

The school improvement process also promotes the equitable and consistent use of fiscal resources. The school budget reflects decisions made about discretionary funds and resources as directed by an assessment of student need. Federal program resources for programs (e.g., Safe and Drug Free Schools, Title I, special education, and extended learning) are allocated and integrated to address student needs identified by the school. Formula and categorical funding from state resources are allocated, and reallocated if necessary, to support specific students needs. In short, revenue from multiple sources are consistently integrated to maximize and sustain a positive impact on student achievement.

Schools seeking to align their resources to better address the learning needs of all learners can consider a number of salient questions.

- Does the campus rely on school improvement planning to identify student needs and resources available to address those needs? Are the needs of students with and at risk of developing disabilities reflected in the school improvement plan?
- Do state and local performance goals drive all campus decisions about curriculum and instruction, budget, scheduling, professional development, and use of staff?
- Are the action steps for school improvement premised on validated, research-based principles of high-performing systems of teaching and learning? Have the steps proposed been validated for students with disabilities?
- Does the school's schedule provide staff quality instructional time? Does the schedule provide ample time for students to receive expanded instructional opportunities and demonstrate performance?
- Are instructional and non-instructional staff allocated and organized based upon the learning needs of all students?
- Are staff development opportunities connected to goals for student learning among all learners?
- Do staff development opportunities model research-based teaching strategies to improve practices in the classroom? In particular, do teachers have access to classroom modeling, coaching, peer observations, and mentoring? Do all personnel consistently participate in professional development?
- Do expenditures of discretionary funds relate directly to an identified school need?
- Are categorical funds from state and federal program resources, including special education to